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BOOK REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS

Blair Stonechild  
*The New Buffalo: The Struggle for Aboriginal  
Post-Secondary Education in Canada.*

Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2006. 190 pp.

**Martin Whittles**

Thompson Rivers University

Every society is informed by an intricate and essential tapestry of interdependent cultural institutions, including politics and social control, kinship and gender roles, expressive culture and art, economics and religion. Yet the manner in which society communicates culture to each new generation can be defined as a foundational institution: the fashion in which culture is taught is as important as the bundles of skills, social behaviours and expectations, and cultural knowledge communicated across generations. Therefore, to disrupt or to attempt to deliberately dismantle a sovereign educational system is to disrupt and potentially dismantle an entire civilization. Blair Stonechild's latest work chronicles just such a process, outlining the struggle by Canadian Aboriginal people to regain control over education; control which was lost through colonization in the last 150 years. Moreover, Stonechild presents a convincing critique of Euro-Canadian Aboriginal policy, while leaving the reader to ponder the future of Aboriginal higher education. As such, this is a relevant and compelling book.

*The New Buffalo* presents readers with a metaphorical parallel connecting the buffalo, as a traditional staple of many Aboriginal nations prior to Euro-Canadian contact, with the history of Aboriginal higher education. Identifying the buffalo as a totalizing institution, providing food, raw materials, and marking the social and spiritual foundation for myriad indigenous civilizations over millennia, Stonechild asserts, analogously, the role of post-secondary education in contemporary Aboriginal communities as a twenty-first century buffalo. He presents post-secondary education variously as an engine of economic development, a tool of individual and community self-sufficiency, and the medium by which to realize indigenous self-government. In short, Stonechild presents Aboriginally-controlled post-secondary education as the

panacea for what has ailed and assailed Aboriginal nations since European contact. Throughout the book he hails it as the principal mechanism to ensure a strong and prosperous future, and asserts that Aboriginally-controlled post-secondary education has the power to reverse and reconcile history.

Stonechild's work is largely one of historical description, replete with dates, names, and chronological statistics; and at this level, the book is an unqualified success. Abounding with depth and detail, it includes a comprehensive set of appendices and a formidable bibliography that will provide assistance to a wide range of scholars and educators. *The New Buffalo* broadly chronicles Canada's original peoples, who, although culturally sovereign at the time of European contact, fell victim to resolute and pompous Canadian nation building. The arrival of outsider-settlers, the intrusion of the Indian Treaty system that displaced Aboriginal people from their traditional territories, and the imposition of a hegemonic federal system for administering Aboriginal peoples and their lives left most abandoned to remote and rural reserves, at the margins of Canadian society. Formal Euro-Canadian education replaced traditional community-based socialization. Yet as a parallel narrative of the larger Aboriginal struggle for cultural and political autonomy, the history of Aboriginal education in Canada that is presented here encompasses much more than a chronological survey. To be sure, it is also a catalogue of the punitive pedagogies and second-rate curricula imposed on Aboriginal students and their communities as a cut-rate shadow of the higher education made available to non-Aboriginal Canadians. Issues of jurisdiction, the struggle between the federal and provincial governments for control of Aboriginal education (alas, but not financial responsibility) are aspects of the larger story. Here is the history of policy, policy-making, and, of course, funding formulae scrums informed by Euro-Canadian insensitivity and outright bigotry. Central to the issue, Stonechild emphasizes, is the fact that governments of all political stripes have systematically refused to take fiduciary responsibility for the very terms the Crown agreed to in the original Indian Treaties, including unfettered Aboriginal rights of access to education.

Higher education delivered to Aboriginal Canadians, as one expects, has evolved significantly in the last 150 years. *The New Buffalo* opens with an overview of mid-nineteenth century Social Darwinian philosophy that posited a natural inequality of races, and through which one Canadian government official claimed the purpose of Aboriginal education was "the intellectual, social and religious advancement of the Indians" (16). Stonechild identifies Aboriginal education formulated and delivered to Euro-Canadian standards as an alternative to the commonly held assumption that without the graces of civilization, Aboriginal nations would soon vanish. In this way, draconian federal legislation provided for a kind of peaceful extinction by a programme of uncompromising assimilation. The 1857 *Act to Encourage the Gradual Civilization of the Indian Tribes of Canada* sought a perceived social redemption of Aboriginal people through a process of enfranchisement, thereby stripping them of their treaty and Indian Act status, and by which successful individuals would be systematically de-Aboriginalised—in many cases with neither their knowledge nor permission. Enfranchised Aboriginal citizens were deemed to be akin to naturalized

Euro-Canadians, and were assumed to be significantly socially assimilated as to be granted the right to vote, own property, undertake contracts. Twelve years later came the *Act of the Gradual Enfranchisement of Indians* that pursued the same assimilationist agenda even more belligerently. The new policy made way for what was to become the infamous residential school system. Thus, Aboriginal children were removed from their homes and reserve communities, forcibly if necessary, and relocated to regional boarding schools—crucibles of assimilation, funded by government and operated by the Christian churches. While the litany of misery brought by the residential school system is only now coming to light, the justification for it is less well known. Here Stonechild lends context: witness then-Prime Minister, Sir John A. Macdonald, who also held the portfolio of Superintendent General of Indian Affairs, rising in the House of Commons in 1883 to announce that “when the school is on the reserve, the child lives with his parents who are savages; he is surrounded by savages...[and so]...Indian children should be withdrawn as much as possible from the parental influence...[to residential schools] where they will acquire the habits and thoughts of white men” (9).

Moving rapidly to the contemporary era, Stonechild devotes considerable ink to outlining the myriad attempts by innumerable national Aboriginal organizations, provincial assemblies, and individual bands which have sought to gain access to—and control for—higher education. Here some readers may struggle with a text that is often dominated by acronyms and a near-endless list of councils, committees, task forces, and government departments. Nonetheless, much of what *The New Buffalo* illustrates can be distilled into an ardent appeal for more funding and increased popular support for Aboriginal higher education. The core argument of the second half of the book asserts the need for higher rates of recruiting, retaining, and graduating Aboriginal students, and for programmes that are as economically prudent as they are culturally relevant.

In sum, when comparing past and present Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations, Stonechild equates the education gap with a disparity in overall quality of life. He reports that presently in the province of Saskatchewan, the Aboriginal unemployment rate is fully four times what it is for non-Aboriginals; more than half of all Aboriginal families live below the Canadian poverty line, while nearly 40 percent of Aboriginal people suffer addictions. The suicide rate is three times the national average. Coupled with the fact that one half of the Saskatchewan Aboriginal population is under the age of twenty, and that as an ethnic group it is experiencing an unparalleled and stratospheric growth in population, the case *The New Buffalo* makes in supporting Aboriginal higher education becomes ever more acute.

At this point, the reader is coaxed into questioning what, if anything, has changed since the nineteenth century. While the residential schools have long been closed, funding and jurisdictional issues remain the theoretical and political bridge between past and present, and it is here that the author is perhaps the most charitable to past Euro-Canadian governments and their bureaucratic servants. It is in the middle chapters that Stonechild makes a clear and convincing case for the legitimacy of the ongoing obligations that a near-endless series of federal and provincial governments have

sought to evade, despite numerous clarifications delivered by way of the Canadian courts. Some readers may wonder why he allows his tormentors off so easily.

Elsewhere, in a chapter entitled "A New Deal," Stonechild notes that the solution is not merely to be found in indigenizing the post-secondary curriculum, as non-Aboriginal education is itself essentially neo-colonial in assumptions and practice. He is quick to note that assimilation in many ways remains at the foundation of non-Aboriginal policy and practice and that Aboriginal students are a colonized people. Much of what currently passes for Aboriginal higher education remains controlled by a college and university system embedded within the dominant segment of Canadian society, itself avowing a paternalistic goal of better preparing Aboriginal students for entry and participation into the capitalist mainstream. Drawing from Métis scholar Howard Adams, Stonechild notes that contemporary universities and colleges are classically hegemonic institutions, and that "their perspectives and ideologies are quite consistent with mainstream courses.... All these courses indoctrinate Native students to conservative middle-class ideologies. They are intended towards creating an Aboriginal bourgeoisie" (118). Compare that with the plea of an Ojibway elder at the First Nations University of Canada who believes that institutions of higher learning "should be safe places where students can learn about, become empowered over, and resolve to rise above not only the personal, but also collective trauma of colonialism" (134) and the reader soon understands the magnitude of the task for which Stonechild advocates so convincingly. This is a book well worth reading.